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## **Robin Hood’s Rules: Gang-culture in Early Modern Outlaw-Tales?**

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The Middle Ages are often characterised as an age of simplicities and certainties: of faith, hierarchy and deference. From this perspective it might seem surprising, or at least counter-intuitive, that so many of the heroes depicted in medieval narratives turn out to be morally ambivalent, uncanny or just plain socially destructive, in ways that would seem to justify the application of the term “anti-hero” (Cartlidge, 2012). One of the most obvious of these medieval “anti-heroes” is Robin Hood. This legendary English outlaw has become something of a proverbial figure in English-language culture, and he continues to provide a point of reference and a basic paradigm for the construction of anti-heroes in a wide range of different cultural contexts.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will suggest an explanation for why it is that medieval literature seems to have been so particularly tolerant of anti-heroes; and also why it is that, unlike most of these medieval anti-heroes, Robin Hood managed to survive and thrive even long after the end of the Middle Ages.

References to Robin Hood in English literature extend back to the fourteenth century, when William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* identified “rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre” as typical examples of the idle pastimes enjoyed by Sloth.<sup>2</sup> However, most of the texts that now embody the Robin Hood tradition belong to the sixteenth century or later; which means that, even despite the medieval origins of his legend and the explicitly medieval setting of many of the stories in which he appears, he is at least as much an early-modern figure as he is a medieval one. The earliest very substantial Robin Hood text still extant is the *Gest of Robin Hood* (Knight and Ohlgren, 2000: 80–168), first printed early in the sixteenth century

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<sup>1</sup> There have been numerous general surveys of the Robin Hood tradition. See, e.g., Keen, 1977; Gray, 1984; Holt, 1989; Knight, 1994; Knight, 2003; Pollard, 2004; Gray, 2005; Johnston, 2013. Studies of this kind almost always begin by providing illustrations of Robin’s enduring currency and appeal.

<sup>2</sup> William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, B-Text (1377–79), V. 386–397, ed. Schmidt (1978):  
“If I sholde deye bi this day,” quod he [Sloth], “me list nought to loke.  
I kan noght parfitylly my Paternoster as the preest it syngeth,  
But I kan rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre,  
Ac neither of Oure Lorde ne of Oure Lady the leeste that evere was maked.”

(probably before 1510), but for which no manuscript witnesses survive. This is a complex text, both in terms of its structure and its literary effect.<sup>3</sup> Probably a composite of earlier narratives now lost, it appears to constitute what is already a knowingly imaginative reworking of traditional material. Robin Hood's continued celebrity in the modern period seems to have been aided (and perhaps even assured) by his appearance on the professional stage: as, for example, in the two plays about him written by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle (which were first printed in 1601).<sup>4</sup> These plays substantially contributed to the process that has been described as Robin Hood's "gentrification": the development of stories in which the rustic outlaw turns out to be no peasant at all, but rather a distressed gentleman in disguise (an interpretative tradition that eventually reaches what is now its most influential formulation in Sir Walter Scott's 1819 novel *Ivanhoe* (ed. Wilson, 1987). Yet both the *Gest of Robin Hood* and the Munday/Chettle plays are probably best regarded as sophisticated and distinctive responses to a much wider popular tradition of telling stories about the medieval outlaw. This tradition is now most substantially and revealingly represented by the corpus of short narrative texts known as ballads, some of which (but not all) have origins in the Middle Ages, although the vast majority of them exist only in forms which they were given in the seventeenth century, or later still. Many of the Robin Hood ballads were gathered together in compilations called "garlands", a form which seems to have been particularly popular in the years after the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660. Two such collections appeared in 1663 and 1670 respectively; and to these can perhaps be added the so-called "Forresters" manuscript (London, British Library MS Add. 71158, ed. Knight, 1998), which was discovered in 1993,<sup>5</sup> and which has been plausibly interpreted as copy intended for a garland that (for one reason or another) never reached print.<sup>6</sup> Several of the texts found in these collections remained current in the eighteenth century (which also saw the production of a number of further garlands), so that, by the time the ballad was being rediscovered and accorded new respect by the literary establishment (including such figures as Scott and Wordsworth), stories about Robin Hood had been told and retold in something like this form for at least five hundred years.

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<sup>3</sup> For discussion of this text's origins and literary affinities, see Bessinger, 1974; Coss, 1985; Knight, 1994: 70–81; Ohlgren, 2000; Knight, 2003: 22–32; Percy, 2005; Hoffman, 2005; Hadfield, 2009: 545–46; Johnston, 2013: 61–66.

<sup>4</sup> *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earle of Huntington*, ed. Knight and Ohlgren, 2000: 303–440. See further, Nelson, 1973, in Knight, 1999: 99–121; Knight, 2003: 49–63; Oakley-Brown, 2005; Johnston, 2013: 79–81.

<sup>5</sup> "In 1993, the Forresters manuscript was discovered at an auction house by A.R. Heath, a Bristol bookseller, was sold to Quaritch, the London book-dealer, and then came to rest at the British Library" (Knight, 1998: ix). The manuscript takes its name from its first item, the ballad 'Robin Hood and the Forresters' (Knight, 1998: 1).

<sup>6</sup> "The evidence invites the hypothesis that the supervisor [of the Forresters collection] was making up a new garland. The fact that the Forresters collection matched and went beyond the 1663 garland, with texts in some cases better and in others more ample, and never copied a text directly from that source, suggests that the intention was to produce a garland which would out-do the 1663 version" (Knight, 1998: xviii). Knight speculates that this intention "was itself frustrated by the publication of the 1670 garland" (Knight: 1998: xix).

As a cultural and literary phenomenon Robin Hood has now attracted a great deal of academic discussion, much of which takes its starting-point (more or less explicitly) from Eric Hobsbawm's seminal study of "social bandits", which was first published in book-form in 1969. One of the central points that Hobsbawm makes is that in reality outlaws are rarely simply anti-social, entirely divorced from the society that they inhabit. They are much more likely, in fact, to rely on particular sources of support provided by sympathetic elements in the population at large. He draws particular attention to:

peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported. In those cases where a traditional society resists the encroachments and historical advance of central governments and states, native or foreign, they may be helped and supported even by the local lords... (Hobsbawm, 2000: 20)

Implicit in Hobsbawm's emphasis on peasants, and rural society, is an assumption that the mechanisms of criminal or anti-authoritarian association are different in an industrial or urban context, but this presents no obstacles to applying his thinking to the Robin Hood tradition, which by definition is located in a world that is very remote from modern cities. It could be argued that there is something of a circularity here, in the sense that Hobsbawm's model seems to have been largely shaped (from the outset) by an awareness of such legends as Robin Hood's – so that attempting to apply his theorisation of "social" banditry to the Robin Hood texts themselves only amounts to an appeal to his original premises: a *petitio principii*. A more specific objection, and one which Hobsbawm himself has acknowledged as the most "cogent" criticism levelled against his work (Hobsbawm, 2000: xi), is that defining a model of banditry in this way risks confusing sociology with mythology: it relies on readings of outlaw-texts that are often remarkably naive, taking at face-value (as descriptions of reality) textual performances that are largely imagined. These days, Robin Hood scholars tend to refer back to Hobsbawm largely *because* of this problem (rather than despite of it), because it gives them an opportunity to take up a position on what (for them) is a key issue: the question of how it is that Robin Hood texts can still have a relevance, and indeed function as an imaginative paradigm, beyond the immediate context of the societies that produced them. In other words, what remains controversial is not so much what the Robin Hood texts mean, but how representative they are. This, of course, has a bearing on the question of how valid it is to introduce Robin Hood texts into a discussion of "gang"-culture. Can stories about Robin and his "Merry Men" really be relevant to such a discussion that also addresses gang-culture in the world today? And, conversely, can modern perspectives on gangs really help us read early-modern texts any more accurately?

There is a larger problem still, one that afflicts all those fictional figures in literary history who have achieved what might be termed "imaginative persistence": that is, the ability to survive with a something like a continuous identity from one text to another over a long period of time – a category that would include not just Robin Hood, but also King Arthur and Sir Gawain, or in most recent contexts, Dracula and Sherlock Holmes. All such figures have a kernel of characteristics that identify them,

but they are always subject to the possibility of alteration and evolution, and even sometimes of deliberate revolution – as, for example, when there is a deliberate contradiction of the expectations that their names evoke. Even though such evolutions and revolutions occasionally lead to modifications that are themselves enduring, the perception remains that these figures are still “the same”: that they possess a kind of “mythic biography” extending across all the different texts in which they appear.<sup>7</sup> This is actually little more than an illusion, an effect of literary history rather than of literature itself; and insisting on it seems to me little more than a critical conceit, and a rather troubling one at that – if only because it seems to endow such figures as with a kind of essential force that comes close to numinousness. In practice, the personalities who achieve “imaginative persistence” tend to be those whose identifying characteristics are distinctive, but not so distinctive, or so numerous, as to limit severely the range of different parts that they can play. In Robin Hood’s case, it is fundamental that he is an outlaw, and that he is associated with the forest, but very few of the other features sometimes ascribed to him are wholly undetachable from his identity, and indeed many of them have only a relatively short history. For example, it is only a subset of Robin Hood texts that link him with Sherwood Forest; only a subset in which he loves Maid Marian; and again only a subset in which he “robs from the rich to give to the poor”. If Robin Hood is – in the terms that Helen Cooper has applied to the motifs of medieval romance (Cooper, 2006: 3) – a kind of a meme, then he is an example of a particularly aggressive one: one with relatively little constant DNA in its make-up.

Literary figures in possession of the “imaginative persistence” often appeal because of the distinctive way in which they perform certain *functions* in narrative. If Robin Hood’s role, as an outlaw, is to break the rules, to be subversive, then it is only his subversiveness that survives across texts, and across time, rather than the particular contexts in which his subversion operates – which is one reason why he seems to inhabit so many different social and political contexts, without actually belonging exclusively to any of them. To put it another way, Robin Hood is, like many such “persistent” figures, first and foremost an opportunity: what meaning he possesses is necessarily heuristic, the result of a continuous tension between inherited expectations and unexpected innovations. What is perhaps most dangerous and potentially self-defeating in any approach to the Robin Hood texts is the assumption that Robin Hood’s apparently persistent identity proves the existence of some underlying ideological consistency. To evoke any kind of “Robin Hood principle” (as is still sometimes attempted)<sup>8</sup> is essentially only a critical convenience – a means of trying to invest one particular synthesis or interpretation with more validity, and a wider applicability, than the evidence actually supports.

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<sup>7</sup> See particularly Knight (2003). In his introduction, Knight acknowledges (p. xvii), but never adequately addresses, the intellectual hazards implicit in such an approach.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Seal (2009). Seal asserts that “the construction of outlaw heroes involves a number of elements that operate together to provide a recurring framework that effectively sustains and reinforces itself” (Seal, 2009: 69), but the definition of elements that he provides is both highly selective and highly generalised, and constitutes no very accurate description of the Robin Hood tradition itself, despite Seal’s suggestion that this tradition is itself paradigmatic enough for Robin Hood to be regarded as a “principle”.

Some of these points can be illustrated by reference to a ballad that appears in the Forrester's manuscript under the title, 'Robin Hood and the Old Wife' (ed. Knight, 1998: 10–15). In this ballad, Robin is on the run from the "sherriffe and all his men": he finds himself in a little house occupied by a "good old wife", whom he asks to give him shelter. This she agrees to do, because of the good turns that the outlaw has done her in the past:

"Thou gau'st me twelpence on a Day  
It bought me hose and shoone.<sup>9</sup>

It was against the Frost and snow  
Iue not forgott it yet..." (lines 31–34)

It would be something of an exaggeration to see the old wife as a member of Robin's "gang", but she is clearly a sympathiser, someone who is profited in the past from his protection, part of the network of support on which he relies. This passage rather neatly illustrates the kind of mechanisms of mutual interdependence (between the outlaw and the often impoverished or marginalised rural communities in which he operates) that are central to the model that Hobsbawm was trying to define; and there is nothing necessarily invalid about using literary evidence of this kind in such a context. The ballad is not necessarily a faithful depiction of how outlawry actually worked in history, but it certainly can be read as an indication that at least some people in the sixteenth century would have agreed with Hobsbawm that this is how it might have worked. It testifies to the existence (in this historical period) of a particular perception of reality, if not necessarily to reality itself. Yet the ballad also has another dimension. It is also an opportunity for creating dramatic effect, which in this case relies rather heavily on the pointed contradiction of several of the inherited assumptions implicit in Robin Hood's traditionally heroic status. Here the figure that the outlaw-hero cuts is anything but manly, dignified or effortlessly successful. The ruse that the old lady suggests as a means for Robin to escape the sheriff is that the outlaw should disguise himself by dressing up in her clothes:

Then lend to mee thy gay cloathing  
And do thou put on mind  
Take heer my Rock<sup>10</sup> and Russett gowne  
And take my Spindle and twine. (lines 37–40)

The rest of the ballad is largely concerned with the situation-comedy that results from this (implicitly demeaning) change of appearance. With the "Old wifes gowne vpon his Back" (line 71), Robin sets off to the greenwood "as fast as he could runn" (line 70), but the strange figure he cuts there only induces panic among the gang-members he has left on guard:

"Whos yon<sup>11</sup> whos youn[?]" quoth Will Scarlett,

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<sup>9</sup> **hose and shoone** = 'stockings and shoes'.

<sup>10</sup> **Rock** = 'distaff'.

“Who’s yon that I do see  
That coms so like vnto an Old witch  
Can neither thrive nor Fee[?]”<sup>12</sup> (lines 73–76)

Will Scarlett is apparently so frightened by the appearance of the “Old witch” that he thinks it necessary to start shooting. His lack of bravery is matched by that of Robin himself, who immediately becomes “a fearful man” (line 79) as soon as he sees Will’s arrow. He manages to extricate himself from this awkward situation, not by any feat of bravery, ingenuity or prowess, but only by dramatically revealing what is here implicitly a marker of his (embarrassed) masculinity, his beard:

“Then Robin threw his Muffler off  
Which he was Muffled in  
Full well they knew their deer Master  
By the Beard vpon his Chinn.” (lines 80–84)

It is perhaps implicit that Robin is not very good at playing the part of a woman, just as in other ballads he turns out to be amusingly inept in the role of a fisherman or a potter.<sup>13</sup> As a woman, he seems (even to his friends) so terrifyingly ugly as to resemble a witch. Then again, Will Scarlett and Little John hardly do themselves any more credit: they are apparently so pusillanimous that they see an old woman as a threat, and also remarkably slow on the uptake, since it apparently never occurs to them that the strange figure running towards them so energetically might not be an old woman at all – not until they see the unambiguous evidence of Robin’s suddenly appearing beard. From this perspective, Robin’s followers looks just as foolishly ridiculous in this scene as Robin does himself. Even if it is by no means necessarily invalid to read this ballad for its sociology (and with an eye to the kind of concerns defined by Hobsbawm), it is clearly a text that has other dimensions as well. From a purely dramatic point of view, the old wife’s reference to the good turn that Robin has previously done her – his gift of twelpence to buy “hose and shoone” – is not simply a means of defining the outlaw as a “social bandit”, or a statement about his willingness to give to the poor what he has robbed from the rich. It is also a way of explaining why she happens to be so willing to lend him her gown: essentially a back-story justifying what is otherwise a rather arbitrary fictional conceit – the idea that the outlaw-hero Robin Hood might look funny in women’s clothes. The humour is not particularly subtle, sophisticated or original, and it certainly sits uneasily with any attempt at earnestly interrogating this text as a witness to the historical sociology of banditry. Even if it illustrates the general validity of some of the points that Hobsbawm was making (not least that outlaws do stand outside the societies in which they operate, are in some ways rather dependent on them), it also underlines

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<sup>11</sup> **Whos yon** = ‘who’s that over there?’ (lit. ‘who is yonder?’). The punctuation is as in Knight’s edition, except that I have supplied the question-marks.

<sup>12</sup> **Can neither thrive nor Fee** = ‘[who] can never thrive or prosper’. This might be taken to mean ‘[who] can [never be allowed to] thrive or prosper’.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. ‘Robin Hood’s Fishing’, ed. Knight, 1998: 16–22; ‘Robin Hood and the Potter’, ed. Knight and Ohlgren, 2000: 57–79.

the importance of reading with an attention to the way these texts function as performances, and to the nature of their relationship with their implied audiences.<sup>14</sup>

So what scope do these considerations leave for discussing Robin Hood in relation to “gangs”? Is it at all valid to think of Robin Hood’s activities (as they are imagined in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts) as examples of gang-related behaviour in English literature? More specifically, is it reasonable to ask how much Robin Hood’s rules amount to an enforcement of a kind of gang-culture – or conversely to ask how much this gang-culture can be said to shape the nature of the rules that he enforces? I am going to try and answer these questions by referring to another of the ballads found in the Forresters manuscript, ‘Robin Hood and the Bride’ (ed. Knight, 1998: 6–9). It describes how the outlaw meets a young man who is cheerfully singing as he goes through the forest with a rose garland on his head, and then a second encounter with the same young man later in the day, but this time without either song or garland. Robin asks him why he is so much less cheerful than he was:

“What Far lese[?]”<sup>15</sup> then the Boy did say,  
“Weight man gon I be wea<sup>16</sup>  
Iue lou’d a lasse these lang sean<sup>17</sup> year  
Another wedds her to day.” (lines 17–20)

The Boy’s rival, it seems, is “Richer farr in Gud” (i.e. ‘much richer in property’, line 22); and we later learn that his beloved is marrying the wealthier man only at the insistence of her father, of whom (as we later discover) she lives in fear (line 57). It is, another words, a kind of forced marriage: a victory of age and capital over youth and true love. Such marriages were never countenanced by the law, either in the Middle Ages (Cartlidge, 1997; Pederson, 2000) or in the early modern period (Outhwaite, 1995). Indeed, the importance of mutual consent to the formation of marriage had been an established principle in canon law since the twelfth century. However, opposition to forced marriage is expressed so often in literary texts throughout these periods as to suggest the existence of a widespread fear of it happening anyway, or at least to suggest that many people liked to imagine the discomfiture of the kind of people who might be responsible for bullying of this kind. No doubt there was always a tendency for marriages to be arranged to some extent by the young people’s “friends”, that circle of senior relatives, parents, godparents, patrons and/or

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<sup>14</sup> On the nature of the historical audiences for Robin Hood (to the extent they can be reconstructed from what the texts themselves imply), see Holt, 1989: 109–58; Johnston, 2013: 50–61.

<sup>15</sup> ‘What’s the good of lying about it?’ (cf. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *faren*, vb., sense 13). Knight completely misreads this line, as his notes make clear: “Presumably he means that the time he has been sad is ‘far less’ than a day, as he has only just learned that his beloved is to be married” (p. 136). As Knight notes (1998: 7) “there appears to be a good deal of northern dialect surviving in the text”, and these northern features are particularly marked in the language used by the boy.

<sup>16</sup> **weight** = *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *wight*, adv., ‘soon’, not “what!” as Knight has it in his glossary (p. 173). The whole line means: ‘Soon I’m going to be a woeful fellow’.

<sup>17</sup> **sean** = ‘seven’.



employers who saw it as their moral and social duty to advise and mediate in the making of marriages (Cartlidge, 2010). In most cases, such “friends” became involved only with the best of intentions: because they were concerned to safeguard the interests of all concerned, not because they were either corrupt or indifferent to the feelings of the prospective spouses themselves. Nevertheless, the line between intercession and coercion might sometimes have been quite a fine one – fine enough to justify what seems to have been an enduring concern about the possibility that arranged marriages might sometimes turn out to be forced ones.

In the ballad, Robin Hood takes upon it himself to implement the fundamental legal principle that both parties to a marriage should freely consent to the union. As a preliminary to this, he insists that the unhappy Boy don Lincoln green, so that in effect he becomes one of the “Merry Men”, a member of Robin’s gang:

Quoth Robin Hood “Do off thy braue cleathing  
Lay it by vpon a stean<sup>18</sup>  
Put on another of Lincolne green  
So faine thou wodst thyne eane loue win.”<sup>19</sup>

The Boy soon did as Robin bid  
That Robin should him ken  
He put on a cleathing of Lincoln green  
Sike<sup>20</sup> like had all his men. (lines 29–36)

After this, the outlaws all descend on the wedding, dramatically halting proceedings just as the bride is about to be given away. The priest takes refuge in the “bell house”, and the parish clerk tries to hide near the altar; “the man that should have wedded the bride” hastily abandons her; and all the other wedding-guests run away as well, so that “the company all were gean” (lines 43–48). Now the ceremony begins all over again, but this time with Robin Hood in an officiating role, and only his gang as spectators:

Soon Robin Hood he Reaks<sup>21</sup> to the Bride  
He take<sup>22</sup> her by the sleeue  
And brought her forth at the church dore  
But neuer askd her friends leaue. (lines 49–52)

He quite deliberately does *not* ask permission of the girl’s “friends” – i.e. the kind of people who might have felt empowered to arrange a marriage on her behalf (and

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<sup>18</sup> **steane** = ‘stone’.

<sup>19</sup> **So faine thou wodst thyne eane loue win** = ‘if [you are] eager that you might win your own beloved’. **So** is used here in a limiting sense (‘On condition that, provided that, so long as, if only’): see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘so’, *adv.* and *conj.*, sense 26. Knight misreads the syntax, wrongly identifying **faine** here as an adverb (p. 170).

<sup>20</sup> **Sike** = ‘such’.

<sup>21</sup> **Reaks** = ‘goes’. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘raik’, *v.*

<sup>22</sup> **take** = ‘took’.

possibly without her permission), a group which in this case clearly includes the bride's tyrannical father. Instead, he makes a point of ascertaining the bride's own feelings. She eventually admits that she is not in love with "The man that should haue wedded the bride" (line 45), and who has now run away, but with a certain "bonny boy". She cares so little about her father's wealth that she would rather be with her beloved even if it meant having to "begg my bread/ Through all the Realmes of Christentee" (lines 63–64). The "bonny boy" is, of course, the young man who was discovered singing in the woods, and is now wearing the Lincoln green of Robin's gang. He is now brought forward, and Robin compels the "coward Preist" and the parish clerk to come out of their hiding-places, so that they can do their duty and unite the two lovers in marriage.

It may seem that Robin's rough treatment of these two churchmen strikes a discordant note right in the middle of what is clearly intended to be a happy ending. Indeed the ballad makes it quite clear the priest and the clerk agree to cooperate with the new wedding only because the alternative for them is the noose (the "wooddy"):

The Preist out of the Bell house came  
                     Sune the Clarke he made him redy  
 At Robins bidding to be ban  
                     To keep his neck out of the wooddy. (lines 77–80)

Implicit here is the idea that Robin's "Merry Men" might function as a lynch-mob. From this perspective, what they represent is implicitly the threat of violence. Yet in the end neither man is harmed, and Robin's strong-arm tactics are balanced by the apparent scrupulousness with which he recognises the priest's right to take payment for the work he does in officiating at the marriage:

Twenty shillings and a faire gold ring  
                     Robin laid downe on the book  
 He bid the preist take what good him thought  
                     He the leaf<sup>23</sup> in the Brides gloue shooke. (lines 81–84)

These twenty shillings and the golden ring come from Robin's own resources, so they amount to a kind of gift, and a generous one at that. Yet the gift is not really intended for the priest. Robin in fact invites him to take as much of this sum as he himself thinks is appropriate for him to take ("what good him thought") – i.e. as much of it as he thinks he deserves – leaving the remainder ("the leaf") to the bride. It is surely implicit that this results in a wedding-present of twenty shillings to the bride, since the priest – who is no doubt acutely aware of the threat of the "wooddy" – presumably decides that what is appropriate for him is nothing at all.<sup>24</sup> The whole procedure is, in effect, a joke at the priest's expense. Both Robin's apparent punctiliousness in offering the priest payment and the description of the gift to the bride as a remainder ("leaf") in fact only draw attention to the extent of the guilty

<sup>23</sup> **leaf** = 'remainder' (*Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *love*, n.<sup>2</sup>; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *lave*, n.<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>24</sup> The text's editor, Stephen Knight, apparently fails to notice the irony: he observes only that "Robin pays the marriage fee as well as providing the ring" (Knight, 1998: 136).

man's discomfort – which, given the dishonourable role that he has so far played, we are clearly invited to relish. The money left for the bride is eventually placed in her glove, partly because this is simply a convenient means of safekeeping (a convenient alternative to a purse or pocket), and partly because of its symbolism, the glove being a conspicuous part of the finery of her wedding-dress, and therefore an emblem of her status as bride.

In all of this, Robin Hood, acts as a kind of judge, an agent of justice, but his power to do so rests implicitly on the fact that he is implicitly accompanied by his gang, whose identity is guaranteed by their “cleathing of Lincoln green”. Robin's justice is, almost by definition, rough justice, and the abruptness and brutality with which he sometimes operates implicitly reflects the fact that the gang provides him with a certain license to threaten or perform acts of violence. Yet Robin's “Merry Men” also limit, as much as they enable, Robin's freedom to adjudicate. It is the gang that enables him enforce his interpretation of justice, but it is at the same time the gang that defines the nature of the justice that he must enforce. In the context of the ballads, Robin's perceptions of justice are directly equivalent to the values, moral and social, generally accepted by his gang – and not just by his gang, for these are also the values shared by the implied audience. From this perspective the imagined performance effectively merges with the performance itself: the listening audience becomes Robin Hood's gang, and vice versa. Just as Robin is allowed to enact justice against the bullying father and his cronies – against money and meanness and manipulation – because of the power he derives from the silent complicity of his gang, so too the ballad's narrator is allowed to imagine and perform the enactment of this justice because of the silent complicity of his listening audience. I say “listening” audience (rather than “reading”) because it is characteristic of ballads as a genre to emphasise their own status as performed texts. The narrator is always a distinct presence in such text (more or less explicitly); he is always imagined to be directly engaged with his audience; and, as is naturally the case with live performances, he is consciously dependent on their goodwill. “And thus my frends my story ends/ Of famous Robin Hood” is the conclusion of one of the other ballads in the Forresters collection (‘Robin Hood and the Sheriffe’ ed. Knight, 1998: 23–33), while another begins “Now listen a while you Gentleman all/To a Tale both merry and good” (‘Robin Hood and the Butcher’, ed. Knight, 1998: 44–51), but this self-conscious performativeness is such fundamental a feature of ballad-style that it could be illustrated at length. Robin Hood's gang, I suggest, has such a distinct role in the Robin Hood ballads because of the way it serves as a reflection of the peculiarly distinct presence of the audience in such texts. Or to put it another way: the answer to the question of ‘who is in Robin's Hood gang?’ is that *we* are Robin Hood's gang, we the people for whom the ballad is performed, or at least we who (when we read it) imagine ourselves listening to a ballad being performed.

There are moments, admittedly, when individual members of Robin's “Merry Men” step forward and play distinct roles of their own in a way that prevents them from being direct reflections of the audience (as particular gang-members like Little John or Will Scarlett sometimes do). However, I would argue that when characters become individualised in this way then they are no longer (by definition) simply part of the gang – the gang is always a collective, just as the audience is. It might also be objected that the assumptions built into the idea of Robin Hood's gang are not

necessarily very transferable: when gangs are dramatised in the literature of other periods and societies, it is by no means always the case that they reflect the audience and its values in anything like the rather choric way that I am suggesting is characteristic of the Robin Hood ballads. In this case, assumptions about gang-culture seem to have been shaped particularly distinctly by the demands of a particular literary genre: there is such a collectiveness about Robin's imagined criminality because there is such a collectiveness about the literary forms in which it tends to be imagined. From this point of view, it is fair to say that "gang"-culture certainly is important to the ethos of Robin Hood's world – but not that this therefore indicates any particular continuity between late-medieval and modern assumptions in relation to gangs. The role played by Robin's "Merry Men" ultimately reveals more about the purposes and expectations implicit in the particular cultural forms in which Robin's Hood's world was expressed, than about the sociology of that world itself.

This brings me, finally, to what I promised at the beginning of this paper: a suggested explanation for why it is that medieval literary culture seems to be so particularly tolerant of anti-heroes; and also an explanation for why it is that, unlike so many other medieval anti-heroes, Robin Hood survived vigorously into the early modern period. The emphasis on performativeness that is characteristic of ballads is actually characteristic of most medieval forms of narrative, which generally figure themselves as addressing a listening audience in a way that is not typical of texts in later periods, and I would suggest that it is largely because of this that medieval narrative tends to ironise its heroes by making them ambivalent and unstable. It does so at least partly in order to create a defence against the potential scepticism of its imagined audiences. It reflects, in other words, the inevitable unease of a performer, who like the implied narrator of a ballad, meets his audience face-to-face, as well as the readiness to engage in evasion, hedging and self-mockery that such unease tends to produce. Why Robin Hood flourishes in the early modern period, when so many of his competitors among medieval heroes recede into obscurity, also seems to me to have more to do with the particular nature of the audience that the Robin Hood texts imply, than with any of Robin's own particular characteristics – let alone any kind of mythical force inherent in the very idea of Robin Hood and his "Merry Men". The implicitly aristocratic audiences of chivalric romance had evolved and disappeared, so that the knights of the Round Table no longer found an audience who could even aspire to resemble them, except through thick veils of allegory;<sup>25</sup> but the Robin Hood ballads continued to appeal, and indeed extended their appeal, because his gang successfully mirrored the values and expectations of the much more diverse but predominantly lower-class audiences implied by ballad. In short, the success and longevity of the Robin Hood tradition owes a great deal to the fact that Robin is a man with a gang – and possibly more to that even than to any appeal that Robin might have exercised as a figure in his own right. Gangs can be seen as a mechanism that enables audiences – and by extension readers, and perhaps even cinema-goers – to take the outlaw's side, to become complicit in the deeds that he does and, at the same time, to impose on him a kind of complicity in the values that they themselves hold. From this perspective, gangs are important to stories about

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<sup>25</sup> The example I have in mind is, of course, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

outlaw-heroes, not so much because outlaws really need gangs, as because the tellers of stories need audiences.

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### Abstract

This essay discusses the extent to which “gang-culture” can be seen as central to the social world imagined in English ballads featuring the outlaw Robin Hood. Focusing on two ballads from the mid-sixteenth century manuscript known as the “Forresters” collection, it illustrates some of the ways in which such texts show themselves to be aware of some of the social dimensions of banditry: for example, in relation to Hobsbawm’s concept of “peasant outlaws” and in relation to apparent anxieties about the phenomenon of forced marriage. However, it also emphasises that ballad-material is often distinctively shaped by the demands of (implied) performance, and that the role played by gangs in such texts directly reflects particular assumptions about the nature of their reception. In the end, the specific characteristics of Robin Hood’s gang is at least as much a product of literary dynamics as of social ones.

